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The Bear Facts

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Introduction

How to use this book:

The most important thing to remember about bears is that they are wild animals and if you venture into bear country you must be prepared to accept them on their own terms. If you are in bear territory, remember, they are the permanent landlord and you are only the temporary tenant.

Bear territory should by no means be off limits to man, but you should recognize and respect these animals as the original occupants.

Over the years a real myth has developed in the public eye about the ferocity of bears and their wanton aggres-

sion toward the trespasses of man. This book is an attempt to dispel that myth and shed some light on the true nature and temperament of this powerful yet graceful creature.

This book is broken into specific sections which deal with the various aspects of bears and their habitat. Some sections may not be applicable to you, but if you are an outdoors person or wildlife enthusiast, or have a general interest in bears, there is a section tailored to your particular informational needs. Use the table of contents as a reference guide for the section or sections which are relevant to your needs.

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Types of bears found in Yukon

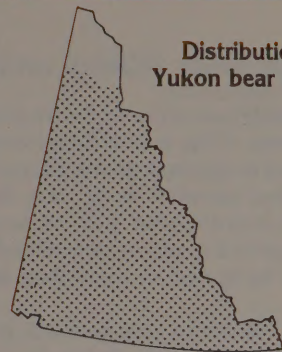
Black Bear (*Ursus americanus*)

Black bears are perhaps the most misunderstood member of the bear family, generally because they are the most frequently seen and the smallest in size. But their power and agility should not be underestimated. Although bear attacks are an uncommon occurrence, those that do happen often involve black bears.

- An estimated seven to 15,000 black bears inhabit the forested regions of the territory from the extreme south to the far north.
- These bears reach maturity at seven to nine years, growing to a height of just under a metre at the shoulder.
- An average male black bear will reach an adult weight of around 110 kg, while the female will achieve about 75 kg at maturity.
- The black bear ranges in color from a pure black coat through various stages of brown to cinnamon or blonde. These animals tend to be more consistent in their individual colors, lacking the multi-toned patterns common

to grizzlies.

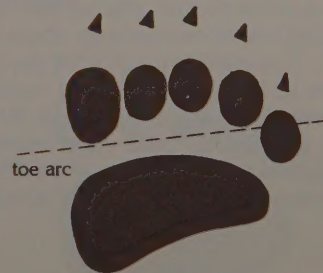
- Some of the distinguishing characteristics of the black bear include a straight line in profile from the forehead to the nose and short, curved claws (40 to 50 mm in length) which make them well suited for tree climbing.
- The black bear is agile and a fast runner, reaching speeds up to 45 km/h over short distances. They are also good swimmers.
- The female produces her first litter at seven to nine years and thereafter every two to four years with up to three cubs born per litter. The female with family requires a range of 10 to 20 km in diameter in order to obtain sufficient food.
- The black bear tends to be more inquisitive and adaptable than other bears, making it more likely to frequent developed areas.



Distribution of
Yukon bear species

Black

Footprints - left front



Black

Grizzly Bear (*Ursus arctos*)

The grizzly bear is one of the most powerful and respected members of the animal kingdom in North America. Because of its size and stature it is perhaps feared more than any other member of the bear family, which to a large degree is unfounded. Like all bears, it should be shown the respect it deserves as a powerful and wild animal, but should be feared no more than any other type of bear.

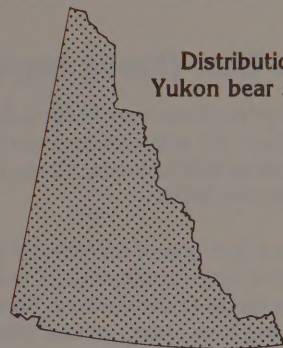
- It's estimated that between six and 10,000 grizzlies roam throughout the Yukon from the extreme southern region of the territory to the Arctic coast.
- A grizzly's diet consists primarily of roots, grubs, berries, small rodents and carrion. Grazing on vegetable and plant matter accounts for about 90 percent of their diet.
- The animals reach adult size in seven to 10 years and live to their late teens and early twenties, growing to a height of about one metre at the shoulder.
- An average adult male attains an average weight of approximately 200 kg, while the female of the species attain an average weight of about half that. This is about

two thirds the size grizzlies reach in more productive southern or coastal settings.

- Coat or fur shades range from a dark, rich brown to almost blonde with the longer hairs frequently having a yellow tipped "grizzled" appearance. Combinations of blonde and brown coats are common, with the legs generally a darker shade than the back.
- Some of the distinguishing characteristics of the grizzly are a concave face, a prominent hump over the shoulders and claws about the length of an average sized man's fingers, making it well equipped for digging rather than tree climbing.
- Despite its size, the grizzly is a surprisingly agile animal and can reach speeds up to 60 km/h over short distances. They are also good swimmers.
- The female produces her first litter at age six to 10 and thereafter every three to five years, with litters rarely exceeding two cubs. Because of their slow reproductive rate, the animal is very susceptible to pressures of over-hunting.



Distribution of
Yukon bear species

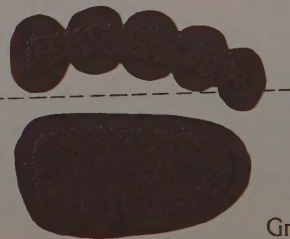


Grizzly

Footprints
left front



toe arc



Grizzly

Polar Bear (*Ursus maritimus*)

Although there are very few resident polar bears found in the Yukon, the extreme northern part of the territory and off-shore ice is used by these animals as they travel through the Arctic.

They are the largest member of the bear family and are protected from hunting except to native people who traditionally reside in the territory. There are strict regulations governing how many can be killed annually.

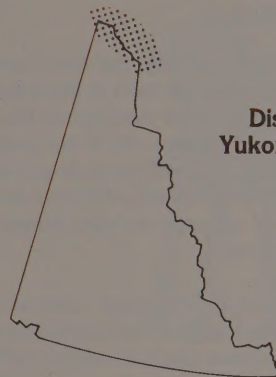
Although the polar bear is not an endangered species in Canada, it is extremely vulnerable to over-harvesting or major ecological changes due to a slow reproductive rate and almost total dependency on a single food source of seals.

- Polar bears have a circumpolar distribution and appear seasonally in the Yukon. During the winter and spring they can be found in the vicinity of Herschel Island and along the northern coastline of the Beaufort Sea. During the summer, these bears frequent the Arctic islands and roam the Arctic sea ice.

- The female produces her first litter at about five years and has one or two cubs every four to five years.
- An average adult male polar bear reaches a mature weight of about 280 kg, while the female attains a full weight of about 200 kg.
- Their color varies from an almost pure white to a cream and can often look yellow in flat light conditions.
- They are almost exclusively meat eaters and can be extremely dangerous around humans. Travelling in territory where polar bears may be present is not advisable without adequate protection.

Hibernation

The winter dormancy period of bears differs from that of most mammalian hibernators because their body temperature does not drop. Grizzly and black bears can remain inactive for up to seven months by dramatically reducing their heart rate, metabolic functions, oxygen consumption and blood circulation.



**Distribution of
Yukon bear species**

Polar

Trichinosis

Trichinosis is a condition caused by the parasite *Trichina* and is most often associated with the consumption of under-cooked bear meat. Some of the symptoms of Trichinosis include difficulty in breathing, pain and swelling around the jaws and tongue and sensitivity around the eyes. All bear meat should be cooked thoroughly and at more than 77°C. to avoid any possible infection.

Spoiled Bears

Regardless of type and size, the bear that has become spoiled through an introduction to the habitat and wastes of man is by far the most dangerous kind. A common misconception is that bears which are seen in close proximity to camps and campgrounds are tame. Nothing could be further from the truth. Whether a bear obtains its food from natural sources or from human refuse, it remains a wild animal.

Young black bears are the most commonly spoiled because they usually have no established territory and may wander over extensive areas in search of food. They are therefore more likely to come in contact with human food sources such as refuse dumps, campground garbage cans and rural cottages. Once a bear learns to associate this easy food supply with humans and developed areas it becomes habituated, ultimately being classed as a spoiled bear.

Garbage is not a healthy diet. The high sugar content in human foods causes tooth decay and gum disease at an

accelerated rate, while the risk of injury to the bear by having its feet cut on broken glass and tin cans is extremely high.

Spoiled bears are either relocated or destroyed. Relocation is often unsuccessful because the bear usually either finds new garbage or returns to the original area. Each year in the Yukon, approximately 100 spoiled black bears and 15 spoiled grizzlies have to be destroyed because they become a threat to human safety.

The spoiling of wild bears can be avoided through responsible handling of food and garbage.

STAY AWAY FROM SPOILED BEARS. They are dangerous, unpredictable, wild animals. If you encounter a bear in a campground or populated area, don't approach it. Notify a Conservation Officer as soon as possible.



Food cache.

Denning

In the Yukon, bears begin to enter their dens as early as Oct. 21 and may not leave until the middle of May. Bear dens are prepared in advance in carefully selected sites — most often in slight depressions where drifting snow accumulates. Dens are usually small in relation to body size. Denning habitat is often found considerable distances away from feeding areas.

Bear habitats

Forests

While the forest is the year-round home of the black bear, grizzly bears also use some forested areas for food and shade. The size and types of trees offer clues of bear use. Bears are rarely found in the more dense forests because the restriction of light reaching the forest floor does not permit adequate growth of vegetation suitable as food. In more open regions, bears feed on a variety of berries in the summer, fall and following spring. In deciduous forests, where aspens and poplars are the primary growth, emerging greens offer a good spring food source to bears.

In regions where a variety of forest and meadow types are found there tends to be a greater volume and wider variety

of bear foods than found in an unbroken expanse of trees. Bears will often make daybeds in forest margins adjacent to open areas. A sleeping bear should never be disturbed.

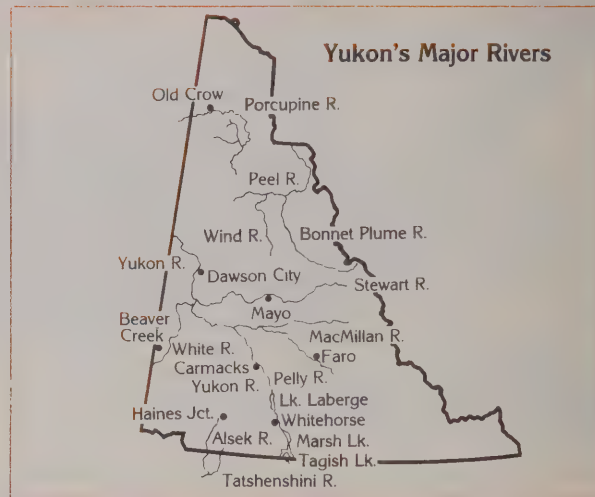
In any forested area where there are berry patches and young shoots and grasses in existence, caution should be taken. Scratch and bite marks on trees, droppings, ripped open rotten logs and upturned earth are all signs that bears use the area for feeding. Due to limited visibility in forested areas hikers and campers should pay special attention to making their presence known.

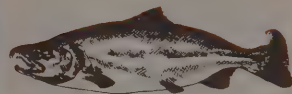


Rivers/Flood Plains

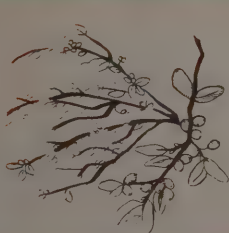
These areas generally have high bear activity during the spring when bears descend from their snowbound dens in search of carrion, roots and emerging grasses. While a few bears use river shore trails and surrounding habitat during the early summer, they do not begin to concentrate in any significant numbers until the soap berries begin to ripen in late July, unless there is an early salmon run. Spawning salmon are an attractive food source for grizzly and black bears and caution should be exercised in river areas during spawning seasons.

Remember when hiking in river areas that the sound of the water may drown out any noises you may normally be making, increasing the risk of a surprise encounter. Keep to open areas, don't camp on river shore trails and keep an eye open for fresh tracks and other signs of bear activity.





Salmo gairdneri



Alpine/Sub-Alpine

Where the forest thins at higher elevations, the habitat is known as sub-alpine and alpine. Sub-alpine terrain is the fringe area between forest and treeless alpine country, supporting shrubs, bushes and small, scattered tree growth. In the true alpine regions the trees disappear entirely.

Both sub-alpine and alpine areas are important habitats for grizzlies throughout the late spring, summer and fall, while black bears rarely venture far into open areas.

Emerging greens adjacent to melting snow and moist creek edges are especially favored grizzly food. Roots, berries and ground squirrels make up the remainder of their diet.

Courting grizzly bears are also often found in the high country as are females with cubs.

When hiking in this terrain it is advisable to travel in open areas and always look ahead for bear signs and activities.



The grizzly bear's long claws make them well equipped for digging, but prevent mature bears from being good tree climbers.



Precautions

General:

- Stay alert and look ahead.
- Do not approach a bear under any circumstances.
- Be aware of the surrounding terrain and try and assess whether or not it may be bear country (refer to bear types and habitat sections). Be especially cautious in those areas where bear food plants grow best: in moist soils, in open areas and near berry patches.
- Surprising a bear when it is sleeping, feeding or with young can result in a dangerous situation — make your presence known to bears, by sight, sound or smell. Given sufficient warning most bears will avoid you.
- Never approach a cub even if it appears to be alone. If you come across a cub, retreat in the same direction from which you came.
- Do not investigate smells of rotting meat. If you come across carrion (any animal carcass) retreat and avoid the area.
- Never attempt to feed bears; it can be extremely dangerous.
- Avoid the use of cosmetic items which give off an artificial odor.
- Incinerate or pack out sanitary napkins and tampons.
- Report bear sightings in developed areas.
- Always keep a clean camp.
- Be alert for the clues that other animals can give you. Croaking ravens may indicate a carcass, running moose or caribou may have been surprised by a bear, and alarm calls of birds and squirrels may indicate that a bear is ahead.
- Pay careful attention to wind direction. The upwind bear will not be expecting you.
- Look for and be especially cautious in areas with fresh tracks, diggings and moist droppings. Bear droppings resemble a human's but contain grasses, roots and berries.

Hikers:

- Hike with a friend or in groups and do not let children straggle behind or rush ahead.
- Leave your pet at home if going into the backcountry. Sight and smell of a dog may provoke aggression and if it retreats to its master it may draw the bear with it.
- Hike during daylight only.
- Always watch for bear signs (see habitat section).
- In thick brush make presence known by yelling several times but avoid whistling for it can resemble natural animal calls.
- Exercise extra precaution when visibility or hearing is restricted.
- Do not carry articles which emit an artificial or strong food smell.
- Pack out everything you pack in. Never bury garbage.

Campers:

- Avoid camping near fresh bear signs (see habitat section).
- Keeping a clean camp is of utmost importance.
- Backpackers should attempt to keep their clothes, tent and other gear free of food odors and should store and prepare food well away from their camping area.

- If camping in a vehicle, store all garbage and food inside.
- Avoid using highly odorous food. Use of airtight containers is a good idea.



- If backpacking, hunting or canoeing, suspend food at least four metres off the ground well away from camp-sight.
- Backpackers in areas where trees are not available, should place food in odor-restricting containers in an inconspicuous location at least 150 metres from your campsite.
- Pay special attention to food scraps. Incinerate them whenever possible.

Photographers:

- Never entice a bear to "pose" by offering it food.
- Keep your distance at all times and use a powerful telephoto lens. Crowding can stimulate aggressive responses.

Construction Crews:

- Animals may become stunned by the headlights of a vehicle at night and the noises and speed of your machinery can frighten them. Please don't harass wild animals.
- The disturbed burrow pits and road edges grow back into important bear foods — be alert in these areas especially in early summer.

Canoeists and Fishermen:

- Always clean your fish a good distance away from camp.
- In doing several portage trips, leave food and equipment in an open area (if possible suspended from a tree) to avoid surprising a bear on return trips.

Rural Residents:

- Fields and domestic animals may attract curious and hungry bears.
- Pay special attention to the disposal of garbage. Incinerate refuse or take it to the nearest maintained dump.
- Dogs are valuable for patrolling your property, guarding livestock and eating food scraps which might otherwise attract bears.

Winter:

- Unlike other hibernating animals, hibernating bears can awaken rapidly. Stay away from known dens or denning areas.
- Bears roaming at this time of year can be extremely dangerous. When fresh signs are in evidence you should stay well clear of the area and report it to the Wildlife Branch.

Encounters

General:

When hiking or camping in the backcountry and in some campgrounds, there is always the possibility that you will encounter a bear. Throughout this booklet, AWARENESS has been stressed as the best precaution in bear country. But how should you act if you do run into a bear?

There are no hard and fast rules about what to do if you meet a bear in the wilds, but there are some actions which might help.

Every bear has its own individual character and the circumstances of every encounter vary. So, if you are looking for a sure-fire method of getting you out of an encounter with a bear, you won't find it here. What you will find in this section are some tips on how to handle yourself and the situation to your best advantage.

- A bear encounter can be an unnerving experience even for seasoned wilderness travellers, but you should make every effort to stay calm and try to assess the situation.

- Remember, although bears are wild and often unpredictable animals, they will rarely attack intentionally unless they feel threatened or provoked.
- When hiking in a group it is important to have communication between the members of your party — a panic outburst could jeopardize the safety of the entire group.
- Never run from or scream at a bear — it may provoke or excite the animal and heighten the possibility of attack.
- Make every attempt to leave an avenue of escape open to a bear — they can feel threatened if cornered.
- Never bury garbage. Scorch unburnable items and pack them out.
- Familiarize yourself with an escape route in the event that a bear visits your camp. Keep a flashlight and noise-maker handy.
- If a bear does visit your camp, move to a new location as soon as it is safe to do so.

The Unaware and Feeding Bear:

DO NOT APPROACH. Wait briefly to see if the bear will move away on its own. If it continues to feed, retreat quietly, moving only when its head is down. Attempt to detour downwind, but only if you can do so undetected. If such a route is impossible, alert the bear to your presence by moving upwind — it is important to let the animal sense you by smell first.

The Unaware and Approaching Bear:

GIVE THE BEAR THE RIGHT-OF-WAY. Move slowly and unnoticed if possible, but if you think you will be noticed, alert the bear to your presence by shouting loud enough for the animal to hear you but not so loud as to startle it.

The Aware and Distant Bear:

STAY CALM. Continue walking but change direction away from the bear. Watch for its response. If the bear appears to follow, remove your pack or any other heavy article and climb a tree if one is available. You must climb at least four metres off the ground, but remember that black bears are good climbers and a tree may not offer an avenue of escape from an aggressive animal.

The Aware and Close Bear:

WATCH THE ANIMAL'S ACTIONS. If the bear stands and waves its nose in the air it means it is trying to identify you. Assist it by talking to it and slowly waving your arms. Bears will often retreat once they know what you are.

World Status

The grizzly bear has the widest distribution of any member of the bear family. Worldwide, the grizzly can be found in Scandinavia, the USSR, Yugoslavia, Italy, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Japan. There are between 26,000 and 31,000 grizzlies in North America of which about 25 percent are found in the Yukon.

About 200,000 black bears inhabit North America and are found in 23 states and all across Canada. Each year about 20,000 black bears are killed of which Canada accounts for between 7,000 and 8,000.

- If the bear appears aggressive — chomping its jaws, woofing or grunting, turning sideways to display its size — drop an article of clothing to distract it and retreat slowly, talking in a calm but authoritative voice. Attempt to emphasize a non-aggressive attitude.

- You may witness a variety of actions, from a retreat to circling downwind of you to a slow approach or a charge. A charge does not necessarily mean an attack. Bears frequently bluff their way out of what they think is a threatening situation by making a false charge and then veering away.

- If contact appears unavoidable, you must make every attempt to protect your vital organs. Drop to the ground, face down, knees drawn up to the chest and hands clasped tightly over your neck. A packsack will also help protect you. Keeping still is of utmost importance. If a bear does try to maul you, serious injury may be reduced or prevented by keeping still. Most people survive bear maulings.

The Problem Bear:

If having difficulties with a bear, you should contact the Wildlife Branch for assistance. Shooting should only be used as a last resort. A wounded bear can also be ex-

tremely dangerous and unpredictable. If you are forced to shoot a bear in defence of life or property, you are required by law to submit the pelt, head and penis bone to the Wildlife Branch.



Dispelling the myths

Bears can't run downhill: False. Bears are agile and can run downhill easily and quickly.

Garbage bears are tame: False. Garbage or spoiled bears pose the most hazardous threat to public safety.

Bears have poor eyesight. False. Bears have good eyesight. They can see colors, form and movement but prefer to trust their more sensitive senses of smell and hearing.

Bears are big and slow: False. Bears are extremely agile and can run at high speeds over short distances.

Black bears aren't dangerous. False. Black bears are as wild and unpredictable as any other member of the bear family.

Bears are carnivorous: False. Ninety percent of a bear's diet contains vegetable matter.

Grizzly bears cannot climb trees: True and False. Grizzly cubs can climb all trees, but only a few adult grizzlies can climb — and only then when branches are sufficiently spaced.

Bears don't swim: False. Bears are excellent long distance swimmers.

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The bear facts

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